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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001836

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SUBJECT: DESPITE SOME EARLIER CONCERNS, GOA TAKING POSITIVE
STANCE ON LUGAR MISSION AND ITS AFTERMATH

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) Ambassador separately called on Minister-Delegate Messahel and Presidential Chief of Staff Belkheir August 27 to express appreciation for Algeria's role in the Moroccan POW release, take a temperature reading, and discuss the way ahead. Both men expressed satisfaction over the success of Lugar's humanitarian mission and, suggesting earlier GOA concerns about our initial public reaction to the release had been assuaged, welcomed the President's message thanking President Bouteflika for having facilitated the POW release. Messahel hoped Morocco would respond to the release with humanitarian moves of its own; reiterated Algeria's firm policy that it is willing to help but is not a party to the Western Sahara dispute; and said President Bouteflika would shortly be sending a letter to President Bush. Both Messahel and Belkheir repeated Algerian arguments that in rejecting the Baker Plan, Morocco had missed an opportunity to secure an outcome to the Western Sahara dispute that met Morocco's needs. Both men also reaffirmed Algeria's interest in pursuing improved relations with Morocco and expected Belkheir's appointment as ambassador to Rabat would help improve communication between Morocco and Algeria. Neither, however, expected much could happen until after Algeria's national reconciliation referendum in late September or Belkheir's arrival in Rabat sometime in mid-to late October. (End Summary and Comment)

U.S. APPRECIATION FOR GOA FACILITATION OF POW RELEASE

2. (C) Ambassador separately called on Presidential Chief of Staff Belkheir and Minister-Delegate Messahel August 27 to review the situation and possible next steps in the wake of the successful Lugar Mission. Deliberately seeking to set a positive tone for the discussion, Ambassador congratulated Algeria for its role in helping ensure the success of Senator Lugar's humanitarian mission. Algeria had given the Senator an exceptionally warm welcome and had delivered just what it had promised -- Polisario's unconditional release of all remaining Moroccan prisoners. The President's letter of thanks reflected his personal appreciation for the helpful role President Bouteflika had played in ensuring this positive outcome. The POW release was an important humanitarian achievement. Everyone won in such a situation and, as the President had written in his letter, we hoped both Algeria and Morocco would seize the opportunity that has been created to work for improved relations and a regional environment conducive to a Western Sahara settlement.

PRESIDENT'S LETTER ASSUAGES EARLIER DISAPPOINTMENT

3. (C) Both Belkheir and Messahel agreed the Lugar Mission was a success, removing an issue that had become a burden and paving the way for a hopefully more positive dynamic in the region. Belkheir was especially satisfied that the quiet discussions with the Ambassador over the past five months had finally borne fruit. Messahel hoped Morocco could address humanitarian concerns such as the missing Polisario fighters, the recent incarceration of 37 Sahrawi demonstrators, and cooperation on family visits and other confidence-building measures. Ambassador said we had been particularly active in encouraging Moroccan cooperation on the latter and wanted to see progress on all humanitarian issues. Both Messahel and Belkheir also positively noted the President's letter, while notably avoiding comment on initial U.S. public reaction to the POW release, which Messahel in a previous conversation had termed "a disaster". (Comment: The President's letter thanking Bouteflika appears to have substantially assuaged earlier disappointment. The importance of the letter for the leadership here was reflected in the fact that the text was published almost verbatim in the government-owned press and received wide coverage in the independent press as well.)

BOUTEFLIKA SENDING PRESIDENT A LETTER

4. (C) Messahel, without providing any details, said that

Bouteflika would shortly be sending a letter to President Bush. Messahel commented that Senator Lugar had left a very positive impression, while noting that the Senator's comments in Morocco suggesting that Algeria and Morocco should directly negotiate an end to the Western Sahara dispute had perhaps unintentionally gone beyond what Algeria understood to be U.S. policy. Ambassador said we knew Algeria's sensitivity on this point and thus were careful to refer to the need for Algeria and Morocco to improve relations and create a regional climate conducive to a Western Sahara settlement. Messahel reiterated that Algeria was not a party to the dispute. However, as it had in the elaboration of the Baker Plan, Algeria would of course be prepared to help the parties find a political solution, within the framework of the United Nations, that honored the principle of self-determination.

REJECTING BAKER PLAN A "MISSED OPPORTUNITY"

15. (C) As in previous discussions, Messahel and Belkheir separately expressed regret that Morocco had rejected the Baker Plan, describing its "autonomy option" and referendum voting procedures as a "missed opportunity" that would have enabled Morocco to secure the outcome it needed. Ambassador said we needed to move beyond the Baker Plan, since one side had clearly rejected it, while perhaps drawing on ideas in the Plan that might offer a way forward. Messahel commented that the "lack of a real interlocutor" on the Moroccan side was a problem for Algeria. Morocco needed to realize that its current course of unilaterally declaring Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara -- at a time when no other country in the world accepted the legitimacy of this claim -- would not work.

RESOLVING THE WESTERN SAHARA A STRATEGIC ISSUE FOR MOROCCO

16. (C) The Western Sahara was a strategic issue for Morocco, but not for Algeria, Messahel continued. He suggested that some in Morocco saw the Western Sahara issue as a way of diverting public attention from problems and rallying the public around the king and national unity. In fact, however, the dispute was a drain, diverting energies and resources that were needed to address economic, social, Islamic, and terrorism challenges within the country. The solution to the Western Sahara conflict did not rest with Algeria, but with Morocco itself, he contended. Sooner or later, Morocco would have to understand that legitimacy could only be achieved through a process of self-determination. The Baker Plan had offered such a process, one that would have worked in Morocco's favor while honoring the idea of self-determination. Algeria had been very consistent in its position, he claimed, and needed to be patient and prepared for the Moroccans to come to this conclusion. In a now familiar refrain, he argued that Hassan II had reached this conclusion toward the end of his life, as a result of Baker's efforts, and that there would have been a solution by now, had Hassan II lived.

ALGERIA SEEKS IMPROVED RELATIONS WITH RABAT

17. (C) Messahel said Algeria agreed on the desirability of working to improve relations with Morocco. In this regard, Algeria had viewed Prime Minister Ouyahia's planned June visit to Rabat, which the Moroccans canceled abruptly, as part of a process that would have re-energized the bilateral commission process, led to a series of ministerial visits, and culminated with a Bouteflika visit in December and the reopening of the border. He discounted the idea that the visit had been canceled because of Moroccan disappointment over the insufficiently "political" composition of the Algerian delegation. Algeria had specifically proposed, and the Moroccans had accepted, that to give more impetus to the bilateral commission process, it would be upgraded from the level of foreign ministers to that of prime ministers. This was consistent with how Algeria handled bilateral commissions with Tunisia and Libya. The Moroccans knew all along that Foreign Minister Bedjaoui was not on the delegation. Messahel claimed that from the outset, it had been determined that the Interior, Energy, and Commerce Ministers plus himself would be the ministerial component of the Algerian delegation.

BUT NO NEW INITIATIVES ANYTIME SOON

18. (C) Asked about next steps, both Belkheir and Messahel agreed that the POW release, the naming of van Walsum as the Secretary General's Personal Representative for the Western

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Sahara, and Belkheir's appointment to Rabat as ambassador were all positive elements. Both confirmed there were no

current plans for a van Walsum visit, though they expected there would be a visit at some point. In any case, they doubted much could happen in coming weeks because Algeria was entirely absorbed by the campaign to win substantial approval of President Bouteflika's Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation in the September 29 referendum. Other than saying it would be important to resume the work of the bilateral commissions, Belkheir avoided answering a direct question as to what it would take to get a meeting between the two Prime Ministers and their delegations rescheduled. He also reconfirmed that he had accepted the Ambassadorial posting in Rabat, despite press articles to the contrary, and would probably leave for Rabat in October. His first priority would be to try to establish better communication at senior levels, especially in the King's immediate circle. He also looked forward to close contact with Ambassador Riley.

AMBASSADOR AGREES COMMUNICATION
A SERIOUS PROBLEM FOR BOTH SIDES

19. (C) Ambassador agreed that communication has been a serious problem for both sides. He added that Belkheir, by virtue of his experience, access, and ability to speak with authority, would hopefully be able to improve communication and help both sides avoid the kind of miscues that have plagued their relationship. Belkheir agreed, noting by way of example that if only the King had called Bouteflika in advance about the 2004 Moroccan decision to lift the visa requirement, it would have been received positively. Ambassador said both sides needed to be more sensitive to the needs of the other and to communicate informally and at high level before taking any public steps. This would help ensure they were properly received and understood. He added that Algeria had made a "serious error" in not responding more concretely to the King's significant gesture of attending the Arab League Summit in Algiers last March. Algeria's perceived lack of response had thus needlessly angered and undercut those in the Moroccan leadership who sought rapprochement with Algeria. Similarly, better communication signaling Algeria's serious interest in moving toward a reopening of the border might have averted Rabat's abrupt cancellation of the Ouyahia visit.

ERDMAN